

Florence of Arabia

By Hamza Yusuf



In 1849, a young English lady journeyed with family friends from her native England to Egypt. Twenty-eight-years-old at the time, she had not yet married, and by Victorian standards she was proving to be of an “intractable nature.” In taking such a journey abroad, she hoped it would help her decide what to do with her life. It turned out that the voyage did, in fact, help her commit to her mission, to which she had felt a strong calling but had refrained from embracing wholeheartedly up until then. Her name was Florence Nightingale.

SHE WENT ON to found modern Nursing and to effect permanent changes in health care, hospital design, statistics, military organization, and global politics. She inspired a Swiss humanitarian to establish the Red Cross, which is currently the single most important relief organization in the world and whose highest achievement award is named after her. She received medals and awards from several heads of state, including the Ottoman Sultan, Abdal Majid, for her selfless service to Turkish soldiers, and the British regents, Victoria and Albert, for her similar service to British soldiers. At the end of her life, she was acknowledged as one of the most influential women who had ever lived.

Many people recognize the name. Few, however, know how truly distinguished she was. At a time when her inspiring story should be a model for our young, recent attempts have been made to diminish her work by focusing on the flaws and frailties of this seemingly impeccable woman. However, if Florence Nightingale were alive today, she would no doubt not bother flattering such busybodies with a response. Instead, she would simply go on about her work: serving the helpless and needy. Such attacks seem to be the perennial price the great must pay, who overlook the faults of those who attack them even as those who attack them feel the need to point out their faults.

Among Florence's many gifts, one that is often overlooked is her uncanny power of observation, which served her well as she administered care to those in need. It was this keen ability of hers to observe others and her surroundings that enabled her, during her year in Egypt between 1849 and 1850, to perceive certain truths about Islam and Muslim society that are more relevant today than ever before. Although many biographers have depicted her life in its entirety, in their discussion of her trip to Egypt they have been strangely oblivious to its impact on her subsequent decisions.

Florence was born on May 12, 1820 in Florence, Italy, while her family was sojourning there, and her mother appropriately named her after the city. The Nightingales were well-to-do British landowners, and her father associated with the Whig party and was involved in the anti-slavery movement. He was also a Unitarian and by its doctrine did not accept the divinity of Christ. Florence, because of political problems associated with her father's affiliation with the Unitarian "dissenters," was raised in the more mainstream Anglican Church, but her writings reveal a strong Unitarian flavor nevertheless, no doubt from her father's influence, and Unitarians today claim her as one of their own.

While Florence was growing up, her father, who had no male children, treated her as a son, bestowing upon her the full attention a firstborn male in Victorian England would normally enjoy. Himself a graduate of Cambridge University, Florence's father chose to give Florence the best university education possible, but at home, since at that time women were not allowed to attend universities in person. However, free thought flourished among the Unitarians, and women raised in Unitarian households were often highly educated. As recently as 1873, a notable scientist argued that "an overindulgence in matters of the mind would shrivel a woman's reproductive organs" and that their minds were "too

fragile for difficult mental activity."¹ This was certainly not the case with Florence, who threw herself into her studies with a relish, rising daily between the wee hours of 4 and 6 a.m., while her family still slept, to prepare her day's lessons. Her curriculum included Greek, Latin, French, German, Italian, history, grammar, philosophy, and mathematics. She also studied the newly emerging social sciences and the embryonic science of statistics. In fact, the invention of the pie chart, so commonly used in presenting data today, is attributed to her.

By the age of 15, Florence had translated sections of Plato's dialogues from the original and by 16 had mastered Homeric Greek. The great Hellenic scholar and pre-eminent translator of Plato, Benjamin Jowett, even had her edit and critique his still-studied introductions to the Platonic dialogues, as well as its summaries. When she was in her late 20's, while traveling with her family in Austria-Hungary, Florence had lengthy conversations with nuns and monks in Latin.

As an adherent to Jeremy Bentham's increasingly influential Utilitarianism, Florence's father had a profound influence on his daughter's early education. At the same time, he often spearheaded radically progressive issues both in England and the United States that reflected the concerns of the mainstream Unitarian Church. Florence's mother, Fanny, though also from a staunch Unitarian household, but conscious of herself more as a lady of her time, would usually retire to the drawing room with her only other daughter, Parthe, to work on their embroidery, while Florence and her father headed for the library to discuss metaphysics, politics, and current social issues.

Florence's maternal grandfather, the parliamentarian William Smith, sponsored the successful Unitarian Toleration Act of 1813, which insured that unbelief in the divinity of Christ was no longer considered a crime in England. Smith was also at the forefront of

the anti-slavery movement led by William Wilberforce, and they campaigned for 40 years until the Parliament finally abolished slavery under the British flag and passed laws that led to the prohibition of the trans-Atlantic slave commerce and the policing of Atlantic waters by British naval ships. The Nightingales were extremely proud of Smith’s work, and although he died when Florence was only 15 years old, she too would become inspired to be an active force for social change.

When Florence reached the age of sixteen, she believed that God was calling her to a great cause she could not yet discern. In a private note to herself, she wrote, “On February 7th, 1837, God spoke to me and called me to His service.”² Though her mother had high ambitions for her young, talented, and very attractive daughter in society, Florence found the petty ambitions of Victorian women intolerable. She refused several marriage proposals, including that of a well-placed and very wealthy suitor, a certain Lord Houghton. Her comment about these proposals was, “I knew God had not made me to tend to Garden parties.”

During an influenza epidemic in December, 1837, Florence looked after the sick of her local parish, displaying an indefatigable and selfless service to their needs. She had a strong calling to serve the poor, though it deeply troubled her mother who was concerned about the behavior demanded of a woman of her social standing. This remained a source of conflict in the Nightingale house, and, during a visit by the famed American philanthropist, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe in 1844 (whose wife Julia would become immortalized as the composer of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic”), Florence asked to speak to him privately. When they were alone, she asked him, “Dr. Howe, do you think it would be unsuitable and unbecoming for a young Englishwoman to devote herself to works of charity in hospi-

tals and elsewhere as Catholic sisters do? Do you think it would be a dreadful thing?”

His answer was, “My dear Miss Florence, it would be unusual, and in England whatever is unusual is apt to be thought unsuitable; but I say to you, go forward if you have a vocation for that way of life; act up to your inspiration, and you will find that there is never anything unbecoming or unladylike in doing your duty for the good of others. Choose, go on with it wherever it may lead you, and God be with you.”³



Typical nurses uniform in Florence Nightingale’s time.

It should be noted that at the time, her goal of charity nursing was considered outrageously improper for a lady of social standing since nurses were largely drawn from the underclass of England and even carried with them a stigma of ill-repute. However, Doctor Howe was expressing a particularly “American” view of things, which, as a new breakaway nation, encouraged the tearing down of “antiquated” European social barriers whenever they were oppressive. Though basic civil rights may have been in effect from the beginning of human law, social rights were entirely unknown in the pre-modern world, and the idea that one was entitled by birthright to pursue a career not associated with one’s place in society was unheard of outside religion and to a lesser degree in the military. What was ironic in this case was Florence Nightingale’s wish to step

down in rank to serve humanity, rather than ascend higher on the social ladder, in what today is known as “upward mobility.”

During frequent visits to London and a trip to mainland Europe, Florence was exposed to “high society” in upper-class British culture, but in all this, she never forgot her calling to God. In a private note she wrote that in order to make herself worthy of God’s service she would need to overcome “the desire to shine in society.”⁴ But she was already shining – her natural beauty and delicate features, coupled with her evident sincerity and selflessness made her highly desirable marriage material. She often complained however about the lack of men who wished to accompany her on her journey of discovery. The call of God was too great for her, and she could not see her way clear to serve both God and husband at the same time. Florence would have found a kindred soul in Islam’s Rabia Adawiyya, the great 9th century Basran mystic who refused marriage several times, preferring passionate love of God as a devotional path instead.

Florence received God’s call a second time on the Nile River in Egypt several years later.

“Arabian Nights and the Bible” as Florence herself wrote.⁵ Napoleon had invaded Egypt in 1798, only a few years earlier, and in spite of the brutality of the colonial expansionism that came from this invasion, the immense *Description de l’Egypte*, one of the founding works of Egyptology, resulted from the investigations of the dozens of French scholars who accompanied him. In London, Florence had met the noted Prussian Ambassador to London and amateur Arabist, Baron Bunsen, of whom her sister, Parthe, wrote in a letter, “Flo [took] tea with the Bunsens to receive the *dernier mot* on Egyptology.” And she added that “Flo” was going on a voyage to Egypt “laden with learned books.”⁶

Florence Nightingale first arrived with the Bracebridges at Aboukir Bay in Northern Egypt, where they hired a boat formerly used by a Turkish bey for his harem, and set out for Cairo and from there to Upper Egypt and Nubia. Although it was a luxurious sailing boat, it was also equipped with oars enabling the crew to row out of any passing doldrums.

At this time, Europeans generally preferred the “modern” speed of steamboats on



THE NILE FROM A 19TH CENTURY ENGRAVING BY DAVID ROBERTS

She had toured Europe with her family and friends, the Bracebridges, who invited the Nightingales to join them on a subsequent trip to Egypt. The English considered Egypt a romantic and exotic destination, the land of

journeys up the Nile, but Florence wrote, “I would never go in a steamer on the Nile, if I were never to see the Nile without it.” Their more gradual journey up the Nile took a total of three months, and Florence complained of

its haste, wishing it could have taken longer. She shared this disdain of modern obsession with speed, progress, and novelty with her American contemporary, Henry David Thoreau, who, during the laying of the first trans-Atlantic cable, remarked that the only news people would be interested in was that the Queen had succumbed to influenza.

Florence traveled to Egypt at a time when the political conditions were tyrannical and thoroughly corrupt. Mehmet Ali's reign had just come to an end, and his son died four months after ascending the throne in 1848. Abbas, a grandson of Mehmet Ali, filled the vacuum. Florence noted in several letters how cruel and despotic his reign was and that Egyptian politics was a violently unhealthy mix of beatings and harem intrigue. She saw that Mehmet Ali, who fancied himself the "civilizer of the East," had not been dead six months and already scarcely a trace of his institutions remained. She attributed this to his arrogant pride and said, "because none of these tried to find out what man was put into the world for, and the words *'the vanity of human greatness'* press into my mind with a force a sermon never gave them; mind, not the vanity of divine greatness."⁷

Florence's initial impressions of Egypt, and of Islam in particular, were understandably negative. Egypt was corrupt, impoverished, and seemingly on its last legs. Much of what she saw came as a tragic surprise. She had never seen people in Europe living in such degrading and oppressive conditions as those she found in Egypt. But as her journey unfolded her perceptions of both Islam and the Egyptian people began to change due to a combination of personal experience and the fact that she was reading all the available literature that she could during her many leisure hours.

It also appears that Florence had several mystical experiences while in Egypt. Once, while traveling on the Nile, she wrote that the question of what God wanted her to do was

finally resolved. She noted in her journal: "Long morning by myself at old Kourna. Sat on steps of the portico, moving with the shadow of the sun, and looking at the (to me) priceless view. God spoke to me again." A week later, still on the Nile, she added, "God called me in the morning and asked me would I do good for Him alone without reputation?"⁸

Florence's very first letter from Egypt was dated November, 19, 1849:

Yes, My Dear People, I have set my first footfall in the East, and oh! That I could tell you the new world of old poetry, of Bible images, of light, and life, and beauty what that word opens. My first day in the East, and it has been of the most striking I am sure, – one I can never forget through Eternity.⁹

Of her first dawn on the Nile she wrote,

It looks not lurid and thick, as very brilliant colours in an English sky sometimes do, but so transparent and pure, that one really believes one's self looking into heaven and beyond, and feels a little shy of penetrating into the mysteries of God's throne.¹⁰

The English consul, Mr. Gilbert, assigned a "janissary," probably an Egyptian soldier or ex-military person, to their party, of whom Florence remarked, "[he is] the most gentle, yet most dignified being I ever saw (I am quite afraid to speak to him)."¹¹ In Alexandria, Florence wrote,

I was so very anxious to see the inside of a mosque, to see where my fellow creatures worshipped, that Mr. Gilbert good-naturedly compassed it, although he said it was an unprecedented act in Alexandria, where they are fanatical Mahometans. I am very glad to have done it, though I never felt so uncomfortable in all my life. We had to put on the Egyptian dress: first, an immense blue silk sheet (the head comes through a hole in the middle); then a white stripe of muslin which comes over your nose like a horse's nose-bag, and is fastened by a stiff

passementerie band, which passes between your eyes and over and behind your head like a halter; then a white veil; and lastly, the black silk balloon, which is pinned on the top of your head, has two loops at the two ends, through which you put your wrists, in order to keep the whole together. You only breathe through your eyes: half an hour more, and a brain fever would have been the consequence. With strict injunctions not to show our hands, we set forth in this gear with the Consul's janissary, who had been denuded of his robes of office that he might not be known.... The mosque was full; the people crowded around us, laughing and pointing. I felt so degraded, knowing what they took us for, what they felt towards us. I felt like the hypocrite in Dante's hell, with the leaden cap on – it was hell to me. I began to be uncertain whether I was a Christian woman, and have never been so thankful for being so since that moment. That quarter of an hour seemed to reveal to one what it is to be a woman in these countries, where Christ has not been to raise us.^A God save them, for it is a hopeless life. I was so glad when it was over. Still the mosque struck me with a pleasant feeling; Sigma^B was struck with its irreverence. Some were at their prayers; but another was making baskets, another was telling Arabian Night stories to a whole group of listeners, sitting around him – others were asleep. I am much more struck with the irreverence of a London Church. It is so pleasant to see a place [the mosque] where any man may go for a moment's quiet, and there is none to find fault with him, nor make him afraid. Here the homeless finds a home, the weary repose, the busy leisure, – if I could have said where any woman may go for an hour's rest, to me the feeling would have been perfect, – perfect at least compared with the streets of London and

"OTHERWISE THERE IS
 MUCH GOOD IN THE
 MAHOMETAN RELIGION.
 CHARITY IS UNBOUNDED;
 AND IT IS NOT THE CHARITY
 OF PATRONAGE, BUT THE
 CHARITY OF
 FELLOWSHIP."

Edinburgh, where there is not a spot on earth a poor woman may call her own to find repose in. The mosque leaves the more religious impression of the two, it is the better place of worship, – not than St. Peter's, perhaps, but better than St. Paul's. We mounted the minaret; the muezzin was just there, calling to prayers in the loud monotonous recitative. The abstraction of a Mahometan at his prayers is quite inconceivable; on board boat, in a storm, it is just the same; the hour comes, the Mahometan falls on his knees, and for five minutes the world is nothing to him; death may come, but it cannot interrupt him; even gain may come, but it will not disturb him. Christians say this here, and laugh at it; but you cannot laugh. The Mahometan religion takes man on the side of his passions; it gratifies all these; it offers him enjoyment as his reward. The Christian religion takes him on the side of penitence and self denial. This seems the fundamental difference: otherwise there is much good in the Mahometan religion. Charity is unbounded; and it is not the charity of patronage, but the charity of fellowship. If any man says to another, "Inshallah (In the name of God)," he may sit down at his table and partake of anything that he has, and no man will refuse. The beggar will do this with the greatest dignity. There is no greediness, no rapacity. Nothing of any value is ever stolen from you; there is no need to shut the door: they will take a trifle, but nothing else. Still what chance is there for a nation whose religion is enjoyment?¹²

These remarks were made at the beginning of her journey while Florence still retained prejudices about Islam that were quite normal for anyone of her day reading

^A This remark must be coupled with Florence's later revelations in Egypt (see further). She must have also been aware that Egypt had largely converted to Islam from Christianity and that there was at the time of her

trip, and until today, a large number of Coptic Christians as well as some members of the Armenian and Greek Orthodox churches.

^B Florence's travel companion.

the available literature in English or French. In spite of that, she clearly saw qualities she knew to be virtuous and acknowledged them with characteristic amazement and passion. At the time of her journey, Muslim societies were still known for their honesty, generosity, and dignity that Florence deeply appreciated and which seem to have withered away today, though she also documented the less savory qualities she encountered with fairness and a high degree of objectivity.

Florence was characteristically more generous in her comments than Egypt may have warranted at that time, and several contemporary Egyptian scholars expressed their opinions on the overall moral degradation of 19th century Egypt. The famous Azhari scholar, ‘Abd al-Majīd Sharnūbī, who would have been a young student at the time of Florence’s visit, wrote an entire book on the merits of complete isolation from society because of the overall corruption and moral laxity he observed all around him. He writes,

The weapons of arrogance and hypocrisy have strengthened, and ostentatious piety and foul behavior have elevated their towering walls. The majority of people now are characterized by the worst qualities: they openly manifest envy, resentment, backbiting, and dissembling; their hearts are sickened with hidden hypocrisy; they now turn away from the spiritual world and occupy their tongues with lies and dissembling, vying in such things with other heedless people.¹³

In opposition to the self-denial of Christianity, Florence Nightingale viewed Islam as a pleasure-driven religion, which has remained one of its enduring aspects for many people, since Islam does not deny the sensual enjoyments of humanity but simply curtails them for one’s own good. If she had been more aware of the lives of the Muslim saints at the time of her visit, she would most certainly have welcomed the spiritual path of

Islam in which the overcoming and actual annihilation of the experiencing self is the goal. In her later years, she wrote, “You must go to Mohametanism, Buddhism, to the East to the Sufis and Fakirs, to Pantheism, for the right growth of Mysticism.”¹⁴ In her book, *Notes from Devotional Authors*, she mentions that one of her favorite poems was by a Persian mystic:

*Four things, O God, I have to offer Thee
 Which Thou has not in all Thy Treasury;
 My nothingness, my sad necessity,
 My fatal sin and earnest penitence.
 Receive these gifts and take the Giver hence.*¹⁵

Florence’s own spiritual pursuit and desire to understand the path of total surrender was a constant theme in her writing. The word “surrender” is repeated over and over to describe her own desired state with God. “True religion is to have no other will but God’s,” she quotes a medieval mystic, adding, “Compare this with the definition of Religion in Johnson’s Dictionary: ‘Virtue founded upon reverence of God and expectation of future rewards and punishments’; in other words, on respect and self-interest, no love.”¹⁶ She also wrote, “We really love God if we desire to do his Will. I make it my earnest prayers that I may live so as to have fulfilled the will of God in everything.”¹⁷

During her stay in Cairo, Florence witnessed a terrible scene of child abuse and remarked that she saw,

... a police officer, who seized a miserable boy, threw him down, and dragged him away. The boy’s white turban came undone, and streamed upon the wind; the bastinado stick appeared: the Secretary (our friend) tried to interfere, but could do nothing. It made one quite sick, as all the details of government do in this horrid country.¹⁸

Florence commented several times on the injustices she witnessed that troubled her so deeply. She noted how corrupt the



A TYPICAL CAIRENE SLAVE MARKET

Christians in Egypt were and how poorly they reflected the teachings of Christianity. She also made this remarkable observation:

[The] Arab would be the most thriving man in the world under any government but this. He will be beaten almost to death, as they often are, rather than give up.¹⁹ (see *Appendix 1*)

What Florence was witnessing and struggling to come to grips with was a people under the yoke of the most wretched tyranny. She described a village she saw in which all of the inhabitants' noses and ears had been cut off, the punishment meted out to them for refusing to pay taxes. Florence visited another village completely razed to the ground, with its men, women, and children massacred because they rebelled against the local government for usurping their farmlands. It is to Florence's credit that she did not attribute these unspeakable atrocities to the Islamic religion but to the rulers over the people. Tragically, atrocities like these have continued up to our own day, leading many to mistakenly conclude that Islam is responsible for the repressive governments and abuse of fundamental human rights now so prevalent in the

Muslim world. At the same time, Muslims have failed to cast a critical eye on their own conditions, too often placing the blame on the "West" and its client Muslim states. These simplistic conspiracy theories fail to examine the deeper problems that existed long before the colonialists and their neo-colonial creations ever wielded an influence over Muslim populations. Such theories, so enticing to defeated peoples, result in either passivity or seething resentment, neither of which are conducive to bringing about effective change.

A few days after seeing the child beaten by the police, Florence commented,

You cannot conceive the painfulness of the impression made upon one by the population here. It really seems to matter little whether an Abbas and Ibrahim reigns, a swine or a jackal – the only difference being that Mehemet Ali would as soon order a murder as to eat his breakfast – it did not spoil his appetite, – while Ibrahim very much preferred it – it increased his zest for the meal; and Abbas, being of weaker stuff, does not order a man to death, but to be bastinadoed, upon which death ensues. One can take so little interest in politics, when it seems to matter so little.²⁰

Profoundly pained by seeing the extensive poverty and lack of basic healthcare and basic necessities of life in Egypt, Florence noted that even though modesty was so highly regarded and socially ordained, she saw many women without adequate clothing. She also recognized what is now called the “third world” aspect of Egypt, often referred to euphemistically in present-day parlance as that of a “developing country.” She wrote,

In Cairo itself, exquisite as is the architecture, everything is undone: either it has been begun and never finished, or it is falling to decay; but you never see anything complete, though the Pacha does not mind what money he spends.²¹

This is yet another sad and powerful reminder of how little things have changed.

Florence expressed empathy in all of her writings and especially in this melancholic statement of hers as she tried to enjoy her “vacation” but was prevented from doing so by the vision of tragedy all around her: “Oh, if one could either forget, or believe, that the people here were one’s fellow creatures, what a country this would be!”

While visiting the tomb of Mehemet Ali, who in the Arab world is still looked upon with nostalgia, Florence lamented,

Mehemet Ali’s tomb is covered with shawls and carpets. I have heard people express the wish that he had lived to see his mosque finished, so much do people’s ideas get corrupted here: and within a stone’s throw of his splendid tomb is the court where the Mamelukes died; he counted them at break of day, and when the sun set where were they? He sleeps now close to the murdered chiefs; and people can forget that murder, and laud Mehemet Ali!²² (*see Appendix 2*)

Florence also noted that she was referred to as a Christian female dog. She characteristically states,

It is not that one minds being spat on (which I have been) for a religion which one loves, but one is so afraid of the gentlemen of one’s party noticing any insult,

as an Englishman’s complaint would bring a bastinado upon the poor wretch, which has often ended in death.²³ (*see Appendix 3*)

Here, her concern was that harm would come to anyone defending her rather than offense at the aggression on her own person and her wounded pride.

Stanley-Poole Lane was a lexicographer and English scholar-traveler whose books on Egypt were very popular in England at the time; Florence appended this quote from Lane upon seeing the wretched condition of one of the villages she visited. She wrote,

Oh, the misery! However, when you hear some things, you will only wonder that the Egyptians are alive at all, not that they are wretched; for, as Mr. Lane says, they are as much oppressed as they can be and live.²⁴

All during her journey, Florence continued to read voraciously and remarked that the British consul, Mr. Murray, who was fluent in Persian, Turkish, and Arabic and who was somewhat of a scholar lent her an “Arabic library to take” with them and had given her “a most philosophic lesson in Arabic.”²⁵ Filled with admiration at some of the details of Qur’anic law she encountered in these books, she wrote,

... the laws of inheritance here (if there were but anything to inherit) is fairer than one would expect. There is no primogeniture, and the female has half the share of the male. A man has only power over one third of his property, and that he may not leave to an heir, unless with the consent of all the others. An only daughter (if there is no son) may inherit half the whole property by the Koran, and the half by common usage. The wife seems, wonderful to believe, to have entire command of own property, and the husband inherits but a fourth, if she have children; and the wife or wives inherit a fourth of their husband’s property, independently and over and above their dowry, if they have no children. With regard to children, the child of a slave-wife inherits equally with the child of the real wife! This sounds much better than one expected.²⁶

Her astonishment at some of the inheritance laws of Islam must be understood in light of the contemporary situation for women in England, where she was not entitled to inherit because of the law of primogeniture, and a wife at that time did not have property rights of her own, her own property coming under the authority of her husband at the moment of her marriage. This 19th century “enlightened” English law deprived many women of shelter and security, a social situation also found as a literary motif in many of the novels of “manners” by Jane Austin and others. We see in this observation in her journal, among many others, that Florence Nightingale’s desire to understand Muslim culture increased, and her appreciation of Islam grew rather than diminished as her time in Egypt lengthened. At the outset, she arrived with fairly typical European prejudices, but due to her own heart’s integrity and a serious commitment to understanding every occasion, she seems to have penetrated beyond mere physical appearances.

In *As-Suyut*, Florence drank water from a public fountain donated to the town through charity, one of many which could be found throughout the Muslim world at the time. These public fountains were inspired in part by the promise of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, of a reward on the Day of Judgment to anyone who quenches the thirst of a traveler, stranger, or whomever might be thirsty. Florence notes,

And at the corner of every road is that beautiful observance of Mahometan hospitality, the covered water-tank, long and narrow, with three little starry openings, and three little dome-lings like a holy water vessel, which is always kept filled with water for the traveler arriving at the city to refresh himself, even before he enter it. I have drunk there myself, and blest the observance towards the stranger.²⁷

When she visited an early Christian saint’s place of meditation, she recounted that Egypt was almost entirely Christian in the fourth cen-



A TYPICAL CAIRENE STREET SCENE

tury of the Christian era and wrote, “*Now*, she [Egypt] is not even Mahometan.” In this astute observation, Florence demonstrated her understanding that it was the people who had abandoned the teachings of their faith who were to blame for all the degradation she witnessed, not Islam.

On December 14th, Florence visited the Pharaonic ruins of Beni Hasan and saw two contemporary villages in ruins as well. She was overwhelmed by the desolation, writing in her journal,

The two deserted villages of Beni Hassan lie to the South of the fort, and what the desolation of an Arab village, when abandoned, is, cannot be described. They were destroyed by Ibrahim Pacha, and every woman and child killed. The whole gave me the idea, not of an old town deserted, but of an old world deserted.²⁸

Reflecting on the destruction she witnessed, she wrote, “All, all the works of God, as well as the works of man, are tottering to

their fall.”²⁹ In this, Florence Nightingale was following the imperative given in the Qur’an to travel through the world to witness and reflect on previous civilizations and their endings. The Qur’an says, “*Everything upon the earth is evanescent, perishing; and nothing remains except the face of God...*”³⁰ And in the chapter entitled, “The Byzantines,” the Qur’an states, “*Do they not travel the earth and see what was the end of those before them? They were superior to them in strength.*”³¹

Recognizing the blessing of seeing the final traces of people who were once more powerful than her own, Florence writes,

It is good for a man to be here, – good for British pride to think, here was a nation more powerful than we are and almost as civilized, 4000 years ago, – for 2000 years already they have been a nation of slaves, – in 2000 years where shall we be? – shall we be like them? It is good for Christian pride, too, to be called “dog” in the street, pointed at, spat at, as we are here. No one looks at us with respect, hardly with curiosity, – we are too low. They take our money and are done with us.”³²

Here is a lesson from Florence Nightingale that we should all learn and especially those of us in the modern Muslim world. We are constantly expecting and demanding our rights in the social and religious sphere but seem to forget that all his life, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ suffered and patiently bore many indignities at the hands of his antagonists in Mecca. He always returned their enmity with equanimity, showing them a superior moral stature, never becoming undone by their wickedness. In the modern world, the sin of pride has been all but forgotten. The Qur’an clearly distinguishes between human dignity possessed by all of us and sinful pride. The first can never be taken away from anyone by another; while the second is the downfall of a self just as it was by the devil himself. Florence took each occasion of humiliation as a spiritual exercise in

self-effacement, just as the Qur’an reminds us: “Return a wrong with a right, and you will find that the one who feels enmity in his heart toward you becomes as a warm friend.”³³

Having herself increased in understanding and compassion during her voyage in Egypt, as well as increasing those around her, by the end of her journey, the Egyptians who accompanied Florence wept tears at her departure, a true testimony to her noble character and the truth and sincerity of her being.

In evaluating her mostly disinterested comments and experiences throughout her sojourn in Egypt, we can come to appreciate something of the many epiphanies she had concerning both God and Islam that might help many Muslims better understand their own tradition. At the same time, her criticisms of the Muslim world are as insightful and important today as they were then, reflecting as they do her unflagging fairness and goodwill toward the peoples and places she visited. In honoring her by looking at her life in all its aspects, and in remembering her invaluable contributions to our world, we honor the best in ourselves.

APPENDIX 1

[The] Arab would be the most thriving man in the world under any government but this. He will be beaten almost to death, as they often are, rather than give up. — FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

This insight brings to mind a very real paradox in countries that no longer thrive but live under either tyrannies or dysfunctional monarchies or democracies. What Florence recognized was the indomitable spirit of the Arab, something that is quite evident to anyone who spends time in the Arab world, or even the greater Muslim world, for that matter. Unfortunately, much of the Arab world still lives under the threat of the “*bastinado*,” and until such governments are replaced with ones committed to laws and the well-being of the people, Arabs and other Muslims will continue to suffer the humiliation of being

“beaten almost to death.”

Nevertheless, it is all too easy to reduce the problems in the Muslim world to the injustice of venal and corrupt leadership. If we look a little deeper, we find an affirmation of Eckstein’s “congruence theory,” in which a government in charge of people reflects the character of an entire population. In many ways, his theory is a confirmation of a well-known saying of the Prophet, peace be upon him: “How you are, so are the rulers put over you.” This sums up Eckstein’s theory quite accurately. Eckstein believed that political institutions fail if they are not a true reflection of the actual social institutions of family, education, business, and all other institutions which make up society. If the family, school, commercial, and other social aspects of the society are despotic, then the government will reflect those despotic qualities as well. This is echoed by the 13th century historian and social scientist, Ibn Khaldūn, in his *Prolegomena*, when he states,

Severe punishment does harm to the student, especially little children, because it belongs among those matters that engender bad habit. Students, slaves, and servants who are brought up with injustice and tyrannical force are overwhelmed by it. It enervates them and causes them to feel oppressed. It makes them lazy and induces them to lie and be insincere. That is, their outward behavior differs from what they are thinking because they are afraid that they will have to suffer tyrannical treatment if they are honest. Thus, they are taught trickery and fraud. This becomes their custom and character. They lose the quality that accompanies social and political structures and engenders humaneness in people – in other words, the urge to protect and defend themselves and their homes – and they become passively dependent upon others. They succumb to indolence and fail to acquire the virtues and qualities of good character. Thus, they fail to achieve their potential and never reach the birthright of their humanity. This results in their reversion to the “lowest of the low.” This is the fate of every nation that fell

under the yoke of tyranny and from it learned the meaning of injustice. This can be affirmed by merely examining any person who is not in control of his own affairs and has no power to assure his own safety.³⁴

APPENDIX 2

Mehemet Ali’s tomb is covered with shawls and carpets. I have heard people express the wish that he had lived to see his mosque finished, so much do people’s ideas get corrupted here: and within a stone’s throw of his splendid tomb is the court where the Mamelukes died; he counted them at break of day, and when the sun set where were they? He sleeps now close to the murdered chiefs; and people can forget that murder, and laud Mehemet Ali! — FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

This similar sentiment is found today in the Muslim world where one finds pictures of people like Saddam Hussein in homes or in the hands of demonstrators, glorifying him. In the mid-90’s, I visited an ostensibly educated and intelligent Mauritanian journalist at his house and upon seeing a picture of Saddam Hussein questioned him about it, reminding him of the tradition of the Prophet, peace be upon him, that angels do not enter houses with images or dogs in them. My implication was that here we had a house with an image of a dog, a double insult. The man simply replied, “Saddam is the only one defending the Arab people.” With this statement, he completely disregarded the thousands of victims of Saddam’s regime, whom Saddam had killed and tortured. I later regretted having insulted innocent dogs with such an odious comparison. Unfortunately, despotic men in the Arab world continue to evoke respect and awe from those fortunate enough not to have directly tasted their tyranny.

APPENDIX 3

It is not that one minds being spat on (which I have been) for a religion which one loves, but one is so afraid of the gentlemen of one’s party noticing any insult, as an Englishman’s com-

plaint would bring a bastinado upon the poor wretch, which has often ended in death.

— FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

During my university training, I had a professor of Religion who occasionally requested that I lecture on Islam. Some Syrian friends of mine came along one night, and before my lecture, the professor said, “Whenever I hear this man speak on Islam, I feel I should become Muslim.” Startled by this, my friends approached the man after the lecture and asked him what he thought about Islam. Looking them squarely in the eye, he replied that when he was a young theological graduate, he took a trip to the holy lands in 1967, after the war had just ended. He wanted to visit Jordan, so one day he took a trip across the bridge into Jordan, where he said he was spat on several times and shouted at by groups of very angry Arabs. From that moment on, he had given up the thought of ever considering Islam as a serious religion with any good in it. It was only later that he began to think of Islam differently because of something in the presentations I was granted to give in his class.

This story clearly illustrates that ultimately the criterion most people use to judge a religion is the behavior of the religion’s adherents. People judge according to what they see people do directly in their behavior and comportment much more than what they hear people say. “Actions speak louder than words” might be a cliché, but it remains true over and over again. 🌸

REFERENCES

- Dossey, Barbara Montgomery. *Florence Nightingale: Mystic, Visionary, Healer*. 1999. (Pennsylvania: Springhouse Corporation).
- Ibn Khaldūn, ‘Abd ar-Rahmān. *Muqaddimah*. 1958. (Cairo: Dār ash-Sha‘b).
- Nightingale, Florence. *Letters From Egypt: A*

Journey on the Nile: 1849–1850. Selected and Introduced by Anthony Sattin. 1987. (London: Parkway Publishing).

“Florence Nightingale on Mysticism and Eastern Religions.” In *Collected Works of Florence Nightingale*. Vol. 4. Edited by Gérard Vallée. 2003. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press).

Sharnūbī, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Majīd. *Tuhfat al-‘Asr al-Jadīd*. 1894. (Cairo: Bulak Publishing).

NOTES

- ¹ Dossey, p47.
- ² Sattin, p11.
- ³ Ibid, p52.
- ⁴ Ibid, p43.
- ⁵ Ibid, p17.
- ⁶ Ibid, p12.
- ⁷ Ibid, p34.
- ⁸ Ibid, p17.
- ⁹ Ibid, p21.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, p21.
- ¹¹ Ibid, p22.
- ¹² Ibid, p26.
- ¹³ Sharnūbī, p4-5.
- ¹⁴ Vallée, p483.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 71.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p343.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, p334.
- ¹⁸ Sattin, p35, 36.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, p28.
- ²⁰ Ibid, p39-40.
- ²¹ Ibid, p40.
- ²² Ibid, p32, 33.
- ²³ Ibid, p39.
- ²⁴ Ibid, p51.
- ²⁵ Ibid, p37.
- ²⁶ Ibid, p52.
- ²⁷ Ibid, p64.
- ²⁸ Ibid, p53.
- ²⁹ Ibid, p54.
- ³⁰ (55: 26-27)
- ³¹ (30: 9)
- ³² Sattin, p64.
- ³³ (41: 34)
- ³⁴ Ibn Khaldūn.